

LMS

I. INTRODUCTION

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A. Purpose of and Need for Action

A programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System was completed in 1976. The Refuge System then consisted of approximately 32 million acres on 367 refuges. Much has changed since that time.

Refuges 2003 - A Plan for the Future was initiated to review the role of the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), and the Refuge System in particular, in meeting the challenges of this changing world. An extensive public outreach and planning effort has been undertaken as part of this project. A 10-year planning horizon was chosen, and the year 2003 was identified in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the Refuge System which will occur in that year.

The purpose of Refuges 2003 - A Plan for the Future is to prepare a System-wide Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the National Wildlife Refuge System to ensure that it meets the challenges to protect fish and wildlife resources and the public's use and

enjoyment of those resources into the 21st century.

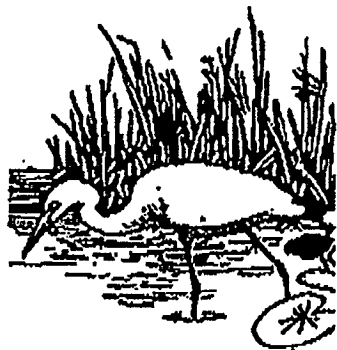
The need for this proposal is based on the following changes which have occurred since 1976:

- * The System has expanded by over 100 refuges and 68 million acres including 54 million acres in Alaska (see Figures 1-3);
- * Numerous responsibilities have been added or expanded through new legislation related to Alaska lands, wetlands protection, coastal resources, cultural resources, environmental protection, public access, and others;
- * The scope of the program for the protection and recovery of threatened and endangered species has expanded dramatically;
- * Changing public values, interests, and leisure-time activities have increased demands for a variety of nonconsumptive uses and interest in the conservation of biodiversity;

- * Continued population growth and the associated intensification of resource uses has increased the need to protect refuge lands from indirect effects of man-induced activities such as habitat degradation, air and water pollution, sedimentation, boundary encroachment, and contaminants; and
- * Public pressure to use refuges for compatible and noncompatible activities has increased.

In this document, the Proposed Action and a diverse array of alternative scenarios for management over the next decade are evaluated, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). It is important to note that this is a programmatic EIS that addresses System-wide approaches to resource and public use management. In many cases it will not totally meet or satisfy NEPA-related requirements associated with proposed actions on individual refuges. However, this document will serve as a foundation for additional planning at the refuge level.

The Proposed Action tentatively identified in this Draft Plan/EIS would be a departure from the current program, but it represents more evolution than revolution in the way the Refuge System is managed. The year 2003 represents a realistic time period within which to face and meet the most difficult challenges, but it will require the cooperation of many other agencies, organizations and the public who share this responsibility.



B. History of the National Wildlife Refuge System

Public concern regarding the unrestricted harvest of wildlife for food and commerce was mounting in the latter half of the 19th century, leading to scattered efforts at habitat protection. Yet, it was not until the election of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 that the time was ripe for an aggressive government conservation initiative. It was public outrage over the devastation of wading bird populations in Florida that led to the establishment in 1903, by Executive Order, of the Pelican Island Federal Bird Reservation. This action is recognized as the genesis

of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

By the end of his administration in 1909, Roosevelt had issued a total of 51 Executive Orders that established wildlife reservations in 17 states and 3 territories. The first refuge acquisitions specifically for management of waterfowl came about with legislation establishing the Upper Mississippi River Wild Life and Fish Refuge in 1924 and the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in 1928. The Migratory Bird Conservation Act, which became law in 1929, provided the primary authority under which the Refuge System grew in the years that followed. The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (Duck Stamp Act) in 1934 provided a source of funds to buy migratory bird habitat. Other refuges were established on former Resettlement Administration lands and as overlays of Bureau of Reclamation water projects.

The Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 established a comprehensive national fish and wildlife policy and broadened the authority for acquisition and development of refuges. A 1958 amendment to the Duck Stamp Act authorized the Waterfowl Production Area program. The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 provided authority for a wide variety of wildlife and recreation related acquisitions. The Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, broadened acquisition and management authority and set in motion the creation of many refuges that would expand the diversity of the Refuge System significantly. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 consolidated the various categories of lands into a single National Wildlife Refuge System. Amendments to the Administration Act in 1976, termed the "Game Range Act", transferred large blocks of Bureau of Land Management lands into the System. The largest addition to the Refuge System resulted from the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, creating 40 million acres of new refuges and expanding existing refuges by nearly 14 million acres. The Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 and the North American Waterfowl Conservation Act have provided recent emphasis on acquisition of wetlands; however, resource objectives have broadened beyond waterfowl and include the full array of wildlife species and associated natural values.

A declining resource base and strong public interest in protection of high value wildlife lands continues to be a major factor for the System. In the last decade, for example, over 2 million acres has been added to the System through purchase or donation.

The National Wildlife Refuge System has evolved into the world's most comprehensive system of lands devoted to wildlife protection and management. In addition to conserving the Nation's wildlife resources, including threatened and endangered species, the Refuge System provides a wide range of wildlife-oriented recreation and